

Jeu de timbres

Steven Stucky (1949–2016)

Written: 2003

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Four minutes

Steven Stucky has an extensive catalogue of compositions ranging from large-scale orchestral works to *a cappella* miniatures for chorus. He is also active as a conductor, writer, lecturer, and teacher, and for 21 years he enjoyed a close partnership with the Los Angeles Philharmonic: In 1988 André Previn appointed him composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and later he became the orchestra's consulting composer for new music, working closely with Esa-Pekka Salonen. Commissioned by the orchestra, his *Second Concerto for Orchestra* brought him the Pulitzer Prize in music in 2005. Steven Stucky taught at Cornell University from 1980 to 2014. He provides the following notes for *Jeu de timbres*:

According to one rule of thumb for categorizing 20th-century music, works that emphasize thematic development and counterpoint are "German," while those that emphasize color, atmosphere and the beauty of individual harmonies are "French." Look at it closely enough, of course, and such a simplistic dichotomy fails right away—just think of the thematic development in Debussy, or the harmonic sorcery in Schoenberg or even (on a good day) Hindemith—but still it has its uses. If by "French" we mean music that follows Debussy's example in prizing the rich harmonic sonority or the delicate instrumental effect for its own sake (as opposed to valuing it mostly for its logical function in the musical grammar), then I am happily a composer of "French" music. Among my household gods are not only Debussy but also several other composers for whom sonority and color are not cosmetic frills but fundamental building blocks, including Stravinsky, Ravel, Varese, Messiaen, and Lutoslawski.

In its four-minute span, *Jeu de timbres* spends most of its energy on rhythmic verve and luminous orchestral colors. There are two themes, to be sure, but the first of

them, a descending line of splashy chords, is mainly about its own splashiness, and even the second, though it is an honest-to-goodness lyrical melody in the strings, would make a poor candidate for a symphonic working-out of the Beethoven or Mahler sort. The title (play, or game, of musical colors) both alludes to these Gallic tendencies in general and makes a small, specific inside joke: jeu de timbres is the French name for the orchestra bells or glockenspiel, an instrument that makes an occasional appearance in this piece. There are other inside jokes, too, including two admiring glances at works by Ravel—one oblique, the other (at the end) quite direct.

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